

By David Gura

At the White House today, President Obama called on Congress to pass a ban on military-style assault weapons, to expand background checks, and to limit high-capacity magazines. He also signed 23 executive orders, on everything from encouraging schools to hire school resource officers -- that is, police officers -- to encouraging research on gun violence.

Law enforcement officials and researchers have been handicapped, the president said, by the fact that, when it comes to guns and gun violence, good data is hard to find.

This goes back to 1986, when the Firearm Owners' Protection Act became law. Robert Spitzer, who teaches political science at SUNY-Cortland and has written four books on gun control, says that law rolled back a lot of gun restrictions. Ammunition dealers didn't have to keep records. "It also made it easier for individuals to buy and sell guns, and to sell guns without a license," Spitzer says, noting there are no records of those sales. None of them require background checks.

The law also placed new restrictions on the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, in response to criticism from dealers and gun owners' groups that the ATF had overstepped its authority.

"Even today, the ATF, when they receive calls to do background checks, has to rely on paper records in boxes, as opposed to a computerized system, even though every agency, office, and organization, and practically individual in the country has and uses computers," Spitzer says.

The ATF can't collect certain kinds of data, and it's not allowed to make some data available to the public.

In 1996, Congress eliminated federal funding for the Centers for Disease Control's research into firearm-related deaths.

"It basically shut down a lot of relevant research into gun violence and its place in public health," says Rep. David Price (D-N.C.), who sits on the House Appropriations Committee.

That decision, he adds, had "a chilling effect" on all kinds of gun-related research. New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg, a strong advocate of strict gun controls, brought it up at a conference on Monday.

"Congress has no business dictating what public health issues scientists can and should study," he said, noting the CDC has a \$6 billion budget, and out of that, \$100,000 went to firearms injury research. To this day, the agency can't do anything that could be construed as advocating or promoting gun control.

Matthew Miller teaches public health at Harvard, and he says the absence of good data makes his job difficult.

"It's very hard to tell my students that they should go into firearms research, because there's no funding."

Today, President Obama called on Congress to help researchers like Miller.

"We don't benefit from ignorance," he said. "We don't benefit from not knowing the science of this epidemic of violence."

The president asked Congress to fund more research into gun violence, and to look for links to violent images on TV, and in movies and video games.